

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## Relations Between Coparenting and Father Involvement in Families With Preschool-aged Children

Jia, R., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2011). Relations between coparenting and father involvement in families with preschool-aged children. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(1), 106-118. doi:10.1037/a0020802

**SUMMARY:** This quantitative, longitudinal study examined reciprocal relations between father involvement (e.g., playing and caregiving) at an initial assessment and observed coparenting behavior (supportive versus undermining) in families with resident fathers and preschool-age children. Possible characteristics (e.g., child gender and family earner status) that may explain variability in the associations that were explored. Results indicate that father involvement influence coparenting behaviors.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Higher levels of father involvement in play activities at an initial assessment predicted an increase in supportive coparenting behavior (e.g., pleasure, warmth, cooperation, interactive) and a decrease in undermining coparenting behavior (e.g., displeasure, anger, coldness, and competition) one year later.
- As levels of father involvement in caregiving activities (e.g., bathing) increased, supportive coparenting behaviors decreased and undermining coparenting behaviors increased over time.
- Child's gender influenced the association between fathers' involvement and coparenting behavior one year later.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with organizations connected with military parents to emphasize the influence of father interaction on coparenting behaviors
- Facilitate father-child interaction groups to help foster parent-child relationship and attachment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military parents about how coparenting behaviors can impact the marital subsystem as well as the parent-child subsystem
- Provide education to military parents regarding parenting skills, especially to younger military parents or those coping with a recent deployment

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support research efforts aimed at better understanding the associations between father involvement and child outcomes in military families impacted by deployment
- Recommend education to professional working with military families regarding how military deployment can influence the parent-child relationship and child well-being

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## METHODS

- This was a quantitative, longitudinal study with one group completing pre-test and post-test assessments including surveys (using an established and reliable measure of father involvement) and observational data.
- This study focused on civilian families recruited through preschools, day care centers, advertisements, and word of mouth.
- Families were assessed at baseline and one year later.

## PARTICIPANTS

- One hundred twelve resident fathers (Mean age = 37.73, SD = 5.74), 112 mothers (Mean age = 36.03, SD = 5.26), 112 preschool-aged children (Mean age = 4.1, SD = .52) participated.
- Across mothers and fathers, the sample was largely White (85%), with small percentages of Black (8%), Latino/Latina (3.5%), and Asian American (2%) participants.
- Most of the sample were married (98%).

## LIMITATIONS

- Other untested variables may be influencing results. For example, the quality of the parent-child dyad was not assessed but could be influencing father involvement and coparenting behaviors.
- Only heterosexual couples with a resident father and at least one preschool-aged child participated; this limits generalizability.
- Other aspects of the outcome may be missed because only one informant was used. For example, only fathers provided self-reported child involvement in play and caregiving activities.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Compare associations between multiple dimensions of father involvement and coparenting in a variety of military families (i.e. rank, type of unit, branch, component, etc.) at different phases of the deployment cycle and children of various ages and genders, to clarify how these contextual factors may affect fathering-coparenting relations
- Examine parental beliefs and expectations about father involvement and how involvement impacts child outcomes (e.g., adjustment, academics, peer relations, etc.); as well as identifying any differences between military and civilian families
- Investigate a variety of father involvement behaviors and explore potential moderators (e.g., marital satisfaction, psychological distress, etc.) that might help explain differential levels of father involvement

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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